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ABSTRACT

Community colleges, because of their late arrival in the development of American education, have suffered from an image and identity problem since their inception. To deal with this problem, community colleges should position themselves as unique community-based service-oriented colleges and market a specific focus to the general public. The first and most important step in the positive positioning of a college involves a commitment from top administration to a strategic marketing process that includes a clear focus of institutional mission, a clear understanding of whom the college serves, and precise knowledge of what makes its services unique. Throughout this positive positioning process, community colleges must view themselves as part of the mainstream of their communities and develop programs and services to meet the identified needs of their external publics. One fundamental and natural connection between colleges and their communities is in the local economy. This connection should be used as a major vehicle for positioning community colleges in the public's mind as a respected and integral part of society. A positioning strategy related to economic development would involve the following steps: (1) the college president must believe in and gain acceptance for the marketing mission; (2) a strategic action plan must be developed with input from internal and external publics; (3) the college must get involved with its community's economic development and chamber of commerce activities by, for example, developing a small business assistance center, assisting in visitation teams to compete for relocating industry, customizing industry-specific training programs, and publicizing the college's role in these activities; and (4) the college must follow through with its commitment and develop a reputation for integrity, responsiveness, and cooperation. (RO)

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Pueblo Community College

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE FOR JUNIOR COLLEGES

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Image Problem

Community and junior colleges have long had an image problem. In many instances, the general public appears to be confused about the purpose of two-year colleges and about their societal significance. Community college presidents and marketing officers have wrestled with this image problem for years with little success. There are now 1,221 public and private two year colleges in the United States, and approximately fifty percent of all freshmen in U.S. higher education are enrolled in community and junior colleges (American Association of Community and Junior College, 1985). Yet the general public continues to think of two-year colleges as simply "vocational schools," "non-credit schools," or as "step-sisters" to the university. Further, with few exceptions, community and junior colleges are not recognized for the tremendous positive impact they have on their communities and states.

Unfortunately, the concept of the community college arrived rather late in the development of American higher education. The public mind-set had already grouped higher education institutions into neat categories including four-year colleges, universities, and, to a lesser degree, trade or technical schools. Community colleges, because of their late arrival in most states, have suffered from an identity problem since their inception. It is clear that community colleges have done well in almost every educational arena except marketing. To market any new product, experts generally agree that one must position the product by 1) developing a frame of reference, 2) determining the target market, and 3) promoting a point of difference. In simple language, to position a product or service one must communicate what it is, whom it is for, and why it is unique. Community colleges should positioning their institutions as unique community-based service-oriented colleges. We must quit trying to be all things to all people and begin to develop and market a specific focus to the general public.

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Positive Positioning

A first and most important step in the positive positioning of a college involves a commitment from top administration to a strategic marketing process. The sophistication level of the general public with regard to media promotion has risen dramatically in the past two decades. Marketing a college these days demands much more than media blitzes and fancy promotional gimmicks. Indeed, a comprehensive marketing strategy, to be effective, must involve the efforts of the entire campus staff and must be based upon sound marketing research. Further, top-level management must utilize a strategic decision-making process that involves 1) a clear focus of institutional mission, 2) a clear understanding of whom the college serves, and 3) precise knowledge of what makes its services unique.

The strategic management and marketing techniques utilized by successful entrepreneurs in the private sector offer valuable direction for educational leaders. Myron (1983) succinctly states the issue by referring to "the academic management revolution." It has been generally accepted that top-level educational personnel are administrators rather than managers. The distinction between the two is clearly defined. Administrators are primarily involved with myopic, internal decisions affecting primarily the day-to-day activities of an institution. Managers, however, are externally and internally focused and have responsibility for shaping the institution's present and future life. The success or failure of any community college today depends primarily upon the ability of its top-level leadership to make valid, efficient, and effective decisions based upon reliable research data. Every decision made by top level management must be tempered with its college's overall strategic marketing mission.

Throughout this positive positioning process it should be recognized that it is time for community colleges and higher education institutions in general, to view themselves as part of the mainstream of their communities rather than as something that is separate and sacrosanct. Further, if we hope to develop a clearer and more positive image of our community colleges, we must become immediately involved in a strategy to reorient our external publics. We must shift from an operational to a strategic perspective; from a past and present orientation to a future orientation (Myron, 1983). In short, community college leaders must examine the present and future needs of their communities, develop appropriate programs and services to meet those needs, and then "toot their horns" about their unique ability to be responsive to those community needs. The following process model can be very effective if used consistently:

Step One: Determine Need or Problem Identification

Step Two: Gather Pertinent and Valid Data

Step Three: List and Evaluate Alternatives

Step Four: Select Best Alternatives or Opportunities

Step Five: Develop an Action Plan

Step Six: Monitor, Evaluate and Publicize Results

George Keller summarizes the importance of strategic thinking by stating: "to think strategically is to look intensely at contemporary history and your institution's position in it and work out a planning process that actively confronts the historical movement, overcomes it, gets on top of it, or seizes the opportunities latent in it" (Keller, 1983). This statement is the essential prescription for positive positioning. It is the responsibility of each community college to determine where it can best serve its community and what activities will best posture the college as an integral and recognized asset to its community.

Positioning Opportunity

Probably no single facet of our society affects the well-being of our communities and our country as does the economy. The state of our economy is reflected directly by our response to its needs. Even in the best of times the economy requires nurturing, refueling, and a perpetually trained labor force. In the worst of times, the tremendous need for revitalization provides greater opportunities for those colleges which are aggressive, foresighted, and responsive in a timely manner. The Governor of Colorado, in his 1986 State of the State address (Lamm, 1986), accurately described the intricate and inseparable relationship between the economy and education. In part he stated: "We have an unfinished agenda in education. Perhaps the most promising national trend in recent years has been the realization that the nation's economic well-being is directly tied to the performance of its educational system." The same principle applies to each service area of each community college. There is a fundamental and natural connection between community colleges and their local economy. This connection should be capitalized upon as a major avenue for positioning our colleges in the public's mind as a respected and integral part of society. Therein would be our basic uniqueness as true community-based colleges and the average citizen, legislator, and congressman would understand the significance of our services.

Many educators and governmental officials are already predicting gloom and doom for local economies and colleges, due largely to the proposed federal budget cuts outlined in the Gramm-Rudman Act. It should be considered however, that never in the history of the community college movement have we had such an opportunity to serve our communities and, at the same time, educate the general public about our unique contributions. Surely we will soon begin to experience reduced revenue sharing in our cities, reduced services from our social agencies, and reduced financial assistance for our students. These events will simply place an even greater emphasis upon the need to create and maintain healthy local economies. What element of our society is in a better position than the community college to respond to this need? If a proper strategic plan is developed, no other agency or educational system will be able to respond to this current and emerging need. Community colleges must not miss this golden opportunity to find a unique niche: to position themselves as a respected and valued part of their communities.

Positioning Method

The positioning strategy is relatively straightforward and easily accomplished. First, the president or chancellor of the college must believe

in the marketing mission and secure acceptance for the mission from his or her constituents. Second, a strategic action plan must be developed with multi-level input from internal and external publics. Third, the college must get deeply involved with its community's economic development and chamber-of-commerce activities. Fourth, the college must follow through with its commitments and develop an impeccable reputation for integrity, responsiveness, and cooperation. One of the community college's greatest strengths is its ability to react to needs quickly. This strength should be utilized to the fullest extent in its efforts to become well positioned via economic development activities. There is an exciting opportunity awaiting any college that has not yet become significantly involved in its community's economic development arena. If a community doesn't have an organization dedicated to economic development, the college should seize the advantage of spearheading the effort to develop one.

A community college's active role in economic development activities should include such services as: 1) developing a small business assistance center, 2) assisting in chamber-of-commerce activities, 3) assisting in visitation teams (to compete for expanding or relocating industry), 4) providing business-related services, 5) customizing and fast-tracking industry-specific training programs, 6) orchestrating funding acquisition for no-cost, industry-training services, and 7) publicizing the college's role in these activities.

Conclusions

Of course this proposed positioning process via direct involvement in economic development may not be the panacea for all colleges. However, significant and continuous linkages between a community college and the economic development efforts of its service area may be the single best method for establishing the respect and recognition that colleges hope to achieve. This example of positive positioning will ultimately result in a better public image, more accurate and timely instructional services, a clearer instituional focus, greater enrollments, and a virtual guarantee of future successas a community-based organization.

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